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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2799  
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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM KPAO EAID OIIP PREL CE

SUBJECT: EU Election Observation Media Analysis

1.(U) The European Union's Election Observation Mission Chief John Cushnahan hosted a press conference today in which he released the mission's long-awaited report on the November 17, 2005 Sri Lankan Presidential Election. Political conclusions of the report will follow in septel. Herewith are excerpts from the report's analysis of the Sri Lankan media's coverage of the elections:

"Taken as a whole, the media offered the electorate a diverse range of political opinions that enabled voters to compare parties and candidates. The state television and radio allotted all candidates free broadcasting time thus allowing them to present their platforms to the electorate.

Both private and state media were strongly polarized along party lines and were strongly supportive either of the Prime Minister (Mahinda Rajapaksa), or the main opposition candidate (Ranil Wickremesinghe). While in this election it provided some measure of balance, it happened more by accident than by design. This is an unsatisfactory situation.

One of the biggest issues in the campaign was the impartiality and fairness of the media coverage of the elections. In a context of strong polarization between two main contesting forces, the state media were widely viewed as being supportive of the Prime Minister. Conversely, the private media were widely viewed as being supportive of the UNP candidate. The findings from the monitoring activity clearly confirm this pattern.

State media did not fulfill their duty to provide balanced and impartial reporting in their election related coverage either in their news bulletins and current affairs coverage, or in their informative programs.

With regards to news and information programs, the state owned television channels (Rupavahini and ITN) dedicated almost 66% of the election coverage given to candidates to Rajapaksa, while only 33% to Wickremesinghe. The same pattern was observed for the 2004 Parliamentary Elections. Last year's data were respectively 68% for the UPFA and 22% for the UNP. In addition, coverage provided to Rajapaksa was generally very positive while a significant portion of the time devoted to Ranil Wickremesinghe was negative.

Conversely, Swarnavahini, the private TV channel monitored,

dedicated 66% of its election coverage to Ranil Wickremesinghe and 33% to the UPFA candidate. This difference is further accentuated if the time that the candidates actually speak on air is considered.

Private monitored dailies showed a similar but less accentuated pattern. Ranil Wickremesinghe received 45% of total space in the Daily Mirror (mainly positive coverage), and 62% in Virakesari. Mahinda Rajapaksa has 54% of the space in the Daily Mirror (mainly negative coverage) and 36% in Virakesari. More balanced coverage was provided by the Island, which dedicated 53% of the election coverage given to candidates to Ranil Wickremesinghe, and 41% to Rajapaksa.

Taken as a whole, the private print media devoted 54% of their space to Ranil Wickremesinghe and 43% to Rajapaksa, the latter receiving more negative coverage."

¶2. (SBU) Comment: Post concurs with the general conclusions of the EU's report concerning media coverage. The report reinforces the general perception that Sri Lanka's media are politically biased, unprofessional, and in need of substantial training. End Comment.

LUNSTEAD